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## In Álvaro's House : Fisher Leaders, Family Life and the Ethnographer at Mexico's Oil Frontier

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# IN ÁLVARO'S HOUSE: FISHER LEADERS, FAMILY LIFE AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER AT MEXICO'S OIL FRONTIER

## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I examine the practice of ethnographic knowledge-production through my fieldwork encounter with Álvaro, a political leader of fishers in Mexico's oil-producing state, Tabasco. Exercising ethnographic reflexivity, I analyze how my relations with Álvaro and his family in a context of conflict between fishers and the oil industry shaped my analytical lens on the politics of resource access. The essay focuses on ambiguity as an overriding characteristic of the research encounter, and suggests that paralleling ambiguities in my analysing of Álvaro during fieldwork and in my own, gendered and racialized positionality within the family were formative for my perspective on fisher – oil industry politics. Furthermore, the analysis shows how my knowledge about the 'field' was made in the intersection of my and the family's mutual efforts to draw each other into our categories of thinking, Álvaro's reflection about his role in politics, and the wider historical and political economic context shaping the relations between the fishers and the oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico. This analysis draws attention to the importance of ethnography in showing the complexity and situatedness of politics of resource access.

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Key words: ambiguity, ethnography, fishers, gender, oil, politics, reflexivity

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## INTRODUCTION: FISHER POLITICS AND FAMILY LIFE<sup>1</sup>

But to find those unmapped destinations  
I would have to abandon the purposes that  
first drove me down that road, and learn to  
ask directions from those who lived along  
it. (Michael Jackson 2012: 11)

I've always defended my place. Others  
look for their own interests... I was a  
representative in the federal Federation

of Fisheries... But I don't like to open up  
like this. That's why they're scared of me...  
I don't know why the government is the  
way it is. I don't know, but I don't want  
them to shape [manage] everybody...  
Liina, don't ask me any more questions.  
(Field notes from discussion with Álvaro  
Vázquez in 2011)

Álvaro Vázquez<sup>2</sup> was a respected oldtimer  
in fishers' cooperatives and in the sea fishers'  
political leadership in Tabasco, Mexico's

oil-producing state. He had grown up during the height of the government-introduced cooperative movement and the corporatist politics of authoritarian Mexico. My fieldwork took place in 2011–2012 and concerned a prolonged conflict over offshore areas between fishers and the oil industry at a time when Mexico's resource politics were undergoing a profound shift towards privatization. While I was trying to learn about fisher leaders' and fishers' politics vis-à-vis the oil industry, Álvaro and his family opened their home to me for three months. Álvaro's role in the conflict was troubled, because he operated as a mediator between the demands of thousands of internally-divided fishers and the co-optation pressures of the oil industry. In this setup, entering the family's intimate sphere to examine Álvaro's role in the tense political situation underscored the difficult compatibility of my researcher / 'daughterly' role in the family in ways that confounded me. In this essay, I analyze my navigation within the ambiguity of immersion in both resource politics and family life and within a tension between my preconceptions and my findings. Exercising ethnographic reflexivity, I also show how my attempts at making sense of Álvaro's, to me, ambiguous political position corresponded with my own ambiguous place in the family. I further show how my analytical insights about our relationship shaped my perspective onto resource politics in Tabasco.

My first meeting with Álvaro took place at a government secretariat in charge of mediating the relations between Tabasco's agrarian communities and the para-statal oil company, *Petróleos Mexicanos*<sup>3</sup> (Pemex), and gave me an idea of the control the government had in the resource conflict. I had recently begun fieldwork and, still inexperienced in Mexico and the politics of fisheries and oil at the Gulf-of-Mexico coast, I was hoping to

embark on fieldwork in a fisher family and familiarize myself with fishers' organizations. However, a secretariat official had suggested that for reasons of security, I live with one of the fisher leaders rather than a rank-and-file fisher. He had then come up with the idea of my staying in Álvaro's household. At the meeting to discuss my fieldwork with Álvaro and four other fisher leaders, the secretariat official actively promoted the agenda of a fisher leader hosting my fieldwork, telling the leaders that by welcoming me, they would be returning a favour to the government for its 'important support for the fisher community'. There was an ease in the way the five fisher leaders slid into a filial role as the official addressed them paternalistically. As I expressed my hopes for fieldwork to the fisher leaders, it was Álvaro who reacted immediately, inviting me to live with his family without hesitation.

My six-month PhD fieldwork in 2011 and 2012 involved actors—sea fishers and government and oil industry representatives in particular—immersed in a prolonged controversy over Tabasco's coastal and offshore areas. I was especially interested in how fishers were making sense of, and reacting politically to, radical restrictions on their access to traditional fishing grounds at a time when the oil industry was both under major restructuration and expanding extraction to new areas. Since the early 2000s, intensified exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons in the Gulf of Mexico had caused continued tensions between the oil industry and the fishers. At the same time, the Mexican government had opened the energy sector to global investment and given transnational companies access to oil exploration and drilling via subcontracts with Pemex, until recently a para-statal company. The major controversy between the fishers and the oil industry concerned the establishment of

an offshore zone of exclusion in 2003, which had been reserved for the exclusive use of national and foreign oil industry actors. During fieldwork, I learned that after initial protests, the fishers' efforts to oppose the restrictions had fragmented and diminished, and the fishers' leadership, including Álvaro, had decided, rather, to engage in what the leaders called 'pacific negotiation' with the oil industry. In retrospect, I have come to see that the difficulties of doing fieldwork in Álvaro's family amidst the latent conflict were formative for my perspective on resource politics. In reflecting on this, I must inevitably downplay the warmth and friendliness with which we related to each other during most of my stay in Álvaro's house.

In Tabasco, a key task for me was to understand the politics of resource access by learning how state power operated in Mexico and, a related matter, what oil—which had had a fundamental role in shaping the relations between the state and people in Mexico—meant to Tabascan fisher leaders and fishers. Since the expropriation of the oil industry from foreign ownership by president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938, the nation's oil had worked both as a powerful popular symbol in political claims for sharing wealth, and as a strategic resource in sustaining the political elite (Breglia 2013; Zalik 2012). Despite the corruption involved in the relations between the state and the oil industry, the recent years' political campaigns against the privatization of the oil industry show the continued popularity of the idea of the nation's oil. Furthermore, the Mexicans' oil nationalism was of a specific kind, given the political economic context wherein Mexico's close economic relations with the United States reconfigured the livelihoods and lives of millions of Mexicans. During my fieldwork, which coincided with Mexico's presidential and congressional election campaigns of 2012,

debate regarding the oil industry's privatization was fierce. At the same time, along the coastline of Tabasco, foreign companies were busy exploring new reserves of oil.

Having moved in with Álvaro's family, I saw that the secrecy and suspicion that characterized the actors I studied also pervaded my relations with Álvaro, complicating my efforts to understand how politics operated among the fishers and oil industry and government actors. 'Álvaro keeps a distance with me which has so far made me careful with the questions I ask him,' I wrote in my diary in the early days of my stay. It was from the beginning obvious that it was in his nature to try to influence what kind of information I was to obtain. Álvaro was reserved in his dealings with me, and careful to point out that he operated within the framework of the law, which he knew profoundly. While I was aware that secrecy was an inevitable part of the political dynamics of the extractive industry, I was nevertheless unaccustomed to dealing with it on a daily basis for months, within the intimacy of family life, and had not considered this difficulty beforehand. My entering as an alien to 'snoop' around Álvaro's lot had quickly created an atmosphere where suspicion and familial relations of care coexisted in a strange and vulnerable status quo.

In this essay, exercising ethnographic reflexivity, I focus on the 'how' of ethnographically studying the politics of resource access. More specifically, I analyze the tension between my pre-expectations and findings to examine how ways of seeing and categorizing, mediated by gender, race and culture, including academic culture, figure in the interpretation of politics, the operation of which is partially hidden to the ethnographer. In doing this, I bring together reflexive analyses of researcher–interlocutor relations (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Coleman 2009; Kondo 1986; Landes 1986),

anthropological discussion on representing political agency (Anand 2011; Madhok 2013; Ortner 1995), and perspectives onto agrarian and resource politics in Mexico (Gledhill 2002; 2008; Nuijten 2004). The essay shows how Álvaro and I, each in our own way, dealt with the tensions that our expectations towards, and difficulty of making sense of, each other raised in the intimacy of family life in the context of the resource frontier. In discussing the Gulf of Mexico as a frontier, I want to highlight the offshore, following Watts (2015), as not only a territory at the margins of the state where ‘often invisible, yet violent struggles over strategic resources and authority’ take place, but also as ‘a particular space—at once political, economic, cultural, and social—in which the conditions for a new phase of (extractive) accumulation are being put in place’ (Watts 2012: 445). This highlights the particular moment in the connections between the intensification of Mexico’s resource politics and wider, transnational networks of capital.

In reflecting on the process of fieldwork, I draw on earlier work by Borneman and Hammoudi (2009) and Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) concerning the construction of ethnographic knowledge through the ethnographer’s personal engagement with interlocutors, and how the research encounter, shaped by the backgrounds of the ethnographer and the interlocutor and the broader context of the study, leads to insights into, and transformation of, the premises underlying the ethnographer’s analytical strategies. Here, my focus is on particular tensions in my and Álvaro’s mutual relationship, which were born out of the disappointments I felt when reality did not correspond with my expectations which related, above all, to my ability to encounter an active organization with a radical political leadership; that is, to discover sites and practices

of ‘resistance’ among the local fishers. Instead, I encountered Álvaro, who sought to influence my fieldwork, in part by highlighting the genderedness of our relations. Recognizing the shortcomings of an initial fixation on the disappointment that my expectations had not been met allowed me to struggle harder to understand the framework of power in which the fisher leaders operated. It also drew my attention to the structure of incentives where I myself was placed, and indicated a link between my culturally-mediated expectations and those in anthropology regarding the character of subaltern politics.

In correspondingly analysing my attempts to deal with the expectations that Álvaro and his family had of me, I draw on Landes’ (1986) and Kondo’s (1986) insights into the analytical processes of female ethnographers who examine patriarchal societies. I suggest that my perspective onto the relations between fishers and the oil industry was shaped in important ways by Álvaro’s family members’ attempts to deal with my ambiguous gender role as a female researcher and my whiteness and foreignness by placing me in meaningful cultural roles in the family. Despite my initial attempts to fit in with the family and accept Álvaro’s authoritative guidance of my fieldwork, I eventually increasingly sought the company of other people, including foreign oil workers, outside of the family’s immediate networks. This process was emotionally taxing for both the family and me and at the same time, or partly because, it revealed multiple dimensions of the distance between us. The following sections show how we sought to deal with living together.

The next section introduces the context of Tabasco’s resource conflict and the fisher leaders. Subsequent sections three to five examine two key ambiguities that shaped my fieldwork. Section three provides a study of

the tensions between Álvaro's tactics when operating as my interlocutor and my analytical preconceptions pertaining to the existence of a fishers' organization or movement with a radical political leadership. These elements came together in how I examined Álvaro as an ambiguous leader in my early fieldwork. The fourth section shows how the gendered and racialized aspects of the interactions between me and various interlocutors in- and outside Álvaro's house also shaped my analytical lens on resource politics. In the fifth section, I attempt a reflexive analysis of my relationship with Álvaro, and show how it helped me identify various structural incentives (Shapiro 2005) that shaped the agendas of the leaders, fishers, and also myself. The point of this is to suggest how my reflexive analysis has allowed for a deeper understanding of the multiple political projects among the leaders and, thus, for insights into the rationalities of power in Tabasco and Mexico. The sixth part concludes the essay and shows how ambiguity worked as my key lens on the role of mediation in the politics of resource conflict.

## STUDYING FISHER LEADERS' POLITICS IN COASTAL TABASCO

The social groups in coastal Tabasco that Álvaro and the political leadership of sea fishers seek to represent are very heterogeneous. Communities involved in fishing are differentiated by livelihoods, social status and political position. There are at least 7,000 sea fishers,<sup>4</sup> half of whom are unlicensed (*pescadores libres*) while the other half consists of approximately 2,700 cooperative fishers and 800 license-holding entrepreneurs (*permisionarios*) who usually do not fish themselves. In addition, many people move between fishing and farming according to

the time of year. Many of the unlicensed fishers are ex-cooperative members, half of whom now work under more or less casual arrangements for the wealthier *permisionarios* while the rest are informal, independent fishers.<sup>5</sup> The proletarianization of the fishing communities, the competition over restricted space, and the large number of unlicensed fishers who have limited political rights, inevitably fragments their political agendas. Consequently, relations between licensed and unlicensed fishers are conflictive. Furthermore, the decreasing viability of fishing since the early 2000s has motivated fishers' migration to urban areas and to the United States.

Pemex, which is the eleventh largest oil company in the world and the third largest exporter of crude oil to the United States (United States Energy Information Administration 2013), has an active presence in the everyday life of the fishing communities. Pemex initiated the development of Tabascan offshore oil reserves in 1977–1980 (Quist and Nygren 2015: 46). With the ramping-up of oil production, coastal populations began to recognize the wide-scale impacts of the oil industry on their environment. Today, the giant Sonda de Campeche (Campeche Sound) complex in the Gulf of Mexico accounts for 51 percent of Mexico's oil production (*ibid.*). It involves over 200 oil-production platforms and roughly 160 foreign companies that operate there as suppliers.

The historical role of oil in mediating the relations between the people and the state in Mexico is reflected in the contemporary relations between Tabasco's coastal populations and the state and the oil industry. The symbolically powerful idea of oil as the nation's resource, belonging to all Mexicans, has fuelled peasant mobilizations for social benefits since the 1938 expropriation of the oil industry from foreign



ownership (Gledhill 2002: 45). To restabilize its hegemony in the 1970s, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) 'statisized' the economy by extending concessions to the peasant sector through its political networks and state clientelism, funded by Mexico's oil revenues (ibid.). In Tabasco and elsewhere, oil revenues have had a central role in mobilizations against the social and environmental impacts of oil (Breglia 2013). In 1976–1983, small farmers, fishers and trade unions organized a large-scale political movement, called *Pacto Ribereño*, against the oil industry. However, Pemex and the government have sought to control both the *Pacto Ribereño* and more recent mobilizations by employing economic compensation, legal measures, and political repression, including imprisonment for political leaders (Guzmán Ríos 2009).

Since 1992, the Mexican government has opened the energy sector to global investment and given foreign companies access to oil exploration and drilling under subcontracts with Pemex (Martínez Laguna 2004). In Tabasco, the increase of foreign subcontractors has taken place since the early 2000s. In 2003, the government imposed security restrictions on traffic near oil installations in the Gulf of Mexico in a 15,907 km<sup>2</sup> marine zone of exclusion, established under the federal legislation '*Acuerdo Secretarial* No. 117' (Diario Oficial 2003). This bans all but oil industry operatives within the zone. While the agreement was justified on the grounds of its contribution to the prevention of terrorism and to security enhancement, one of its aims seems to have been to avoid offshore social confrontation, thus ensuring undisturbed oil production (Quist and Nygren 2015). Recent legal reforms to privatize the oil industry (Diario Oficial de la Federación 2014a; 2014b) despite opposition by a large proportion of Mexicans, were introduced under President

Enrique Peña Nieto's (PRI) administration. This took place soon after the PRI returned to power, having re-gained the presidency from the right-wing *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN), which had ruled the country during two successive terms from 2000 until 2012, after the PRI's prior 70-year era. The expansion of operations in coastal areas with the participation of foreign subcontractors is likely to increase the oil industry's influence on the living conditions of fishing communities considerably in the future.

In 2011–2012, the fishers' leadership consisted of 12 middle-aged men, most of whom had a decades-long history in the fishers' organizations of mediating relations with the oil industry, and were involved in the fishing business either as cooperative leaders or private entrepreneurs. During my stay in Tabasco, the fishers' struggle against the recent restrictions on movement near the oil installations was in a latent phase. Instead of engaging in open conflict, the fishers' leaders focused on employing the restricted mechanisms of the law to defend their access to the Gulf while the oil industry's tactic has appeared to be to shape the conflict into one over economic compensation through the continuation of clientelist relations within its social responsibility and compensation schemes. Furthermore, complaints of environmental and social harm, compensation demands, and the oil industry's corporate social responsibility activities were all managed by a state secretariat; from the fishers' perspective, this diffused culpability and the division of responsibilities between the state and the oil industry. At the same time, fragmented groups of fishers organized protests both onshore and at sea, demanding fairer resource access and firmer adherence to agreements concerning compensation. In 2011–2012, fishers' frustrations regarding the leaders' forms of 'pacific' negotiation and thus lack of

aggressive pressure towards the oil industry were part of quotidian tensions in the coastal communities.

Changes in environmental legislation at the federal level in 2012 may provide new opportunities for Tabasco's coastal communities to stake collective claims against the oil industry. The *Ley de Acciones Colectivas* (Law on Collective Actions), which enables groups of at least thirty persons to raise class-action claims for environmental harms caused by the oil industry, has already made it possible for a group of fishers and small-scale farmers from the interior of Tabasco to use the law as a basis for suing Pemex, its subsidiaries and the involved government institutes for damages caused to the environment and local livelihoods (Asociación Ecológica Santo Tomás 2013; Inter Press Service 2013). If fishers are able to meet the burden of demonstrating oil-derived environmental harms and verify that those harms are the cause of reduced fish catches, the case could bolster their efforts to regain their rights to the sea space and livelihoods as sea fishers.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE SEARCH FOR THE SUBJECT OF RESISTANCE

Having moved to live with his family, the course of my fieldwork became influenced by my relationships with Álvaro and the seven family-members of the Vázquez household, especially Álvaro's youngest child, 24-year old Sofia. Whereas Álvaro took care of familiarizing me with the practice and local politics of fishing, Sofia was the most eager of the Vázquezes to get to know me as a person. In retrospect, reflecting on my intense involvement with both father and daughter made me pause to analyze how my preconceptions and my positionality influenced

my perception. A crucial aspect of this was paying attention to how the three of us sought to categorize each other.

Ethnographic analyses by Anand (2011) and Madhok (2013) about political agency in two different 'oppressive contexts' (Madhok 2013) in India provide a frame for examining my difficulty in interpreting and representing Álvaro's place in the political setup that was enfolding me. The nuanced differences between these two authors in focusing either on the constraints (Madhok 2013) or on the complexity and possibilities (Anand 2011) of agency made me further examine analytical perspective as a question of epistemological choice-making. However, during early fieldwork, my difficulty in conceptualizing the fishers' and their leaders' relations with the oil industry resembled more what Ortner (1995) points to as leading to 'ethnographic thinness' in studies of resistance: my own commitment to social change, mediated through the values of my culture made it hard for me to accept that Álvaro was in many ways an effect of the operation of power at the oil frontier. In this situation, it was tempting to think of Álvaro's agency in terms of either succeeding or failing in radically defying the state-industry politics through persistent and clearly-formulated political claims.

Hence, at the same time as I needed Álvaro to represent resistance, Álvaro and his family sought to make sense of my intentions and to fit me into their categories. As Kondo (1986) points out in her analysis, attempts like these are part and parcel of the negotiation of power between the ethnographer and the interlocutor. For me, the study of a resource conflict, the fragmented factions of which I was as yet unable to identify and access in the fisher communities, increased my dependence on Álvaro in terms of how I framed and interpreted the data I collected. However, as I show below,



Álvaro's influence on my thinking was not straightforward but grew out of tensions with my own disposition to assess Álvaro according to particular categorizations. Mostly, I was trying to grasp on whose 'side' Álvaro stood as a leader; was he merely trying to benefit from his mediator position or did he have a political agenda in defence of Tabasco's fishers?

During my first month, Álvaro actively introduced me to certain important places and people. He occupied a long-time position as a cooperative leader, and had a number of both protégés and rival leaders in the coastal fisher communities. Well aware of some fishers' accusations of corruption against him and other leaders, Álvaro occasionally made an effort to emphasize to me that he had 'nothing to hide'. However, I realized he was not in the position to invite me to various political meetings between fishers and the oil industry, which interested me. Being left out, especially during the first weeks of fieldwork, highlighted my impression that there was a realm of negotiations between the fishers and the oil industry which remained invisible to me. It also exacerbated my perplexity about Álvaro's agency; whether he was, in fact, fish or fowl.

My first weeks with Álvaro thus demonstrated Álvaro's difficult position between the oil industry and his constituents. However, it also brought out a concern he seemed to have of my being in his house. Considering that Álvaro's interpretations of my intentions and of my foreignness may have been far from straightforward, and taking into account the history of complicated relations between Mexicans and Americans, I think it is possible that one of his judgements about me was that I was some sort of *gringa*.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, I became increasingly aware in my relations with Sofia and the rest of the family how ambiguous as a woman I was

from the family's perspective. Álvaro's wife Doña Elena, their daughter Sofia and the other women of the household never asked me about my work but instead focused their comments on my womanhood through discussions about appearance, sexuality, reproduction and family. All of this highlighted the tensions between my roles as a woman and as a researcher of masculine spheres. The ambiguity of my femininity in the eyes of the family's women further increased the difficulty of fieldwork; it was not only the fact that I had no access to Álvaro's dealings with the oil industry but also the difficulty of being seen both as a female and a researcher that made fitting in hard. It was here, in the crossroads of encountering Álvaro and the family as foreign, white, a researcher and a woman, where my analytical lens on the politics of resource access began to gain focus.

Coleman (2009) and Uusihakala (2016) have analyzed the ethical and analytical difficulties they have faced as ethnographers when interlocutors whose behaviour they have been tempted to judge morally have actively sought to challenge their thinking. The tensions involved in these relations reveal crucial aspects of both the research subject and the authors' own thinking. However, what interests me in these relationships and my own case is also their dynamic processuality. Within the three months of fieldwork with Álvaro, thanks to his persistence, my initial will to judge gradually changed into a desire to hear.

The first thing Álvaro did was to familiarize me with the legislative framework for fisheries, and to take me to interview people who belonged to his group of leaders. Ten days after my arrival in the family, he made me acquainted with two cooperative fishers who introduced me to the internal division and frustration over differentiated access to the sea, and to political subjectivity in the coastal communities. During

our conversations, however, the fishers vented their frustration about the situation on Álvaro's person.

Francisco was the first of these interviewees. No sooner had I asked him about the restrictions on fishing in the Gulf, than he began to press Álvaro about money and fishing nets that his fisher cooperative was supposed to have received from the governmental secretariat as compensation for oil explorations. Álvaro seemed very uncomfortable, and quickly the atmosphere became tense.

Francisco: I didn't like how they managed the fishing nets. I had asked for nets for seven boats.'

Álvaro: 'Pemex gave a negative reply ... it washed its hands ... to me they gave 10.'

A very tense exchange of words ensued. I listened for a while and then asked what the discussion was about. Álvaro explained to me that the secretariat had offered a helping hand to sea-fishers by donating fishing nets to cooperatives, while Pemex had refused to give nets to anyone. In other words, instead of Pemex compensating the fishers for harm it had caused their fishing activities, a common procedure in the oil industry, nets had been donated ('regaló') by the secretariat. Álvaro said that for some reason the nets had been distributed unevenly, some cooperatives getting as many as 20 nets, others just a few, and he himself 10. Francisco's look was incredulous and really angry. I asked why this unevenness and Álvaro could not explain. Instead, he asked me to go to the other side of the yard and check out the fishers packing iced fish onto a truck going to Mexico City. Then he ended the interview abruptly.

In an interview with another fisher, Juan, right after Francisco's, the tension was even

more palpable. Juan was visibly surprised and uncomfortable about our arrival. I asked him general questions about the economic situation of fishers after the establishment of the *zona de exclusión*. Soon, the interview turned into a tense discussion between Juan and Álvaro. Juan, anxious, asked Álvaro about gasoline, saying, 'We were supposed to receive gasoline from Explora<sup>7</sup> every three months but we haven't received anything the whole year.' Then he said that *pescadores libres* need to have some alternative, and to 'calm down', as 'this is going to continue'. Juan complained to Álvaro that the Secretary in charge of mediations with the oil industry never wants to receive him, meanwhile explaining to me that 'it isn't convenient for the government that there is political organization' among *pescadores libres*. Álvaro was again very uncomfortable, and vaguely promised to try and contact a politician he knew, and asked Juan not to 'compromise' him. As communication between the two men grew even tenser, Álvaro suddenly decided to go home, saying people were expecting him.

On the way home from these strange 'interviews', both of which had ended abruptly, Álvaro asked me what I had thought of them. Astonished by the turn of events and the threatening atmosphere, I was unable to say much. I was too apprehensive to ask Álvaro why exactly the fishers had seemed both angry and afraid; Álvaro's dealings with me in the first days of fieldwork had made me sense that my curiosity tended to raise his suspicions. Later I saw that by taking me to people who accused him of failure and embezzlement, he had been openly showing me the dynamics of the context where he, as a leader, was trying to deal with the divide-and-rule tactics of the oil industry. Much later, I saw this had also been his test for me, one which I had not quite passed. My attention, even though I did not discuss it with

Álvaro, had not been on Álvaro's complicated position, but on my own fear and anxiety about the tenseness of the communications, and on my disappointment in Álvaro's failure to stand up for the cooperative and unlicensed fishers whom I thought he had the ethical, if not legal, obligation to represent. This, and Álvaro's secrecy—which I did not understand at the time may have been more a basic suspicion of my intentions, or something he was pressurised into—persuaded me to see him as a failing leader. The interviews, however, also usefully turned my attention to the hierarchies and conflicts of the fisher communities, to the diffuse division of responsibilities between the *paraestatal* and the secretariat, and to how these and the oil industry's complex politics of exclusion worked among and against the fishers. I also began to see there was much more heterogeneity in the agendas of different fishers and leaders than I had initially envisaged.

Although at the time I did not see that Álvaro had been testing me, I soon began to feel increasingly uncomfortable about asking him about his relations with the oil industry. I felt I had *no right* to be nosy, and found myself feeling ashamed of my spy-like curiosity. Álvaro had given me a glimpse of how power worked at the resource frontier, but had then closed the 'curtain', leaving me wondering whether I had failed to gain his trust, or whether it was the politically more powerful actors behind the scenes who threatened my further access. However, the interviews also underscored the double role I had in the family: at the same time as apparent political contradictions seemed to block my access to certain issues, paradoxically, as a woman I was already *inside the sphere of the intimate* as a kind of sister, a role which was emphasized especially in my relations with Sofia.

It was soon obvious to me, however, that it was impossible for Álvaro to influence where

I went and what I came to know. After six weeks of living in the family, Freddy, a fisher who belonged to the federation headed by Álvaro, told me about an event where Pemex, Explora, and the secretariat had given out motors to coastal fishers, Álvaro's federation included, as compensation for Explora's studies that were hampering offshore fishing. Freddy wanted me to think that Álvaro had actively kept me from knowing about the meeting but I later understood that I had no way of knowing whether that had actually been the case. Then, two weeks later, as I returned home from a week-long trip to Ciudad de México, I saw I had arrived in the middle of what was going to be a meeting between 20 fishers and two officials from the secretariat in the Vázquez living room:

Although I have told Álvaro about the time of my arrival, I realize my coming is a surprise to everyone. There are approximately 13 people in the living room; everybody is waiting for the rest of the fishers to arrive from nightfishing *robalo* [bass]. I am told that people from the secretariat are coming too, on the business of *empleo emergente*, which is temporary work, typically in road maintenance or other infrastructural work, provided to fishers by the oil industry during low seasons in fishing. After half an hour the men from the secretariat arrive. They are two, and they're clearly not happy to see me among the fishers. Álvaro mumbles something to them about not having known about my coming. The men sit by a table where they spread their papers and begin to call the fishers by name to sign a paper. They take a photo of each fisher and check their identity card; this is a way to make sure that the *empleo emergente* does not go to wrong persons. The entire

operation is very serious, and the officials display an arrogance towards the fishers while they make no contact whatsoever to me. When the photos and the signatures are over, the fishers leave and Doña Elena invites the secretariat men to the kitchen for lunch. Nobody says anything to me; I'm invisible, and not welcome in the men's company. I go to my room, keeping the door open but I'm not able to hear what they are talking about. (Fieldnotes 2011)

These glimpses into interactions between the fishers, the oil industry and the government convinced me that my presence in them was not welcomed by the oil industry. I consequently changed my fieldwork strategies to expand my study to fishers and leaders beyond Álvaro's circle and began to avoid telling him where I was going. Álvaro, respectively, continued to be suspicious of my activities, something reflected in his inquiries to me about whether I had already 'reported to Finland' about my findings, and his apparent relief when I said I had not, saying that 'with time I would gain access to everything I needed to understand'. Once he also jokingly suggested I was a spy. While at the time I was frustrated by these suspicions regarding my intentions in studying Álvaro, I was unable to see all the possible reasons that may have fuelled them. Of course, the entire setup of my stay in his family was highly exceptional and perhaps gave reason to suspect my alliance with state actors. However, my being a foreigner, with features and habits that resembled those of the white oil workers who walked the streets of coastal Tabasco and extracted Mexico's resources for the increasing benefit of others, may have meant more to Álvaro that I at the time understood. On top of that, the fact that I was myself also occupied in

trying to figure him out possibly increased his suspicions.

In analyzing the politics of oil and fisheries from Álvaro's house, I saw that the ambiguity I observed in Álvaro as a leader paralleled my own experience of ambiguity in the family. At the same time as I tried to grasp whether Álvaro was completely co-opted by the oil industry or was also actively defending the fishers' livelihood, I also felt that my own positionality as a foreign researcher-woman in the family was full of irreconcilable ambiguity. While these ambiguities involved two different issues, they were not unrelated; both linked to attempts by me on the one hand, and by Álvaro's family on the other, to affect the dynamics of the research encounter (Kondo 1986). Moreover, they became my angle onto both my own preconceptions regarding fieldwork, and to the rationalities of power of which Álvaro was part.

Examined from this perspective, I later saw that my initial frustration with Álvaro's tactics of controlling my fieldwork were linked to my own search for 'resistance', which was partly a result of the influence of research literature and of the ethos of my training, which focused on social movements. However, a coherent movement did not exist, and even trying to identify an unambiguous social group of fishers was difficult because of the social, political and economic heterogeneity of the coastal communities. Furthermore, the fisher leaders were not in charge of a radical political agenda in defence of fishers' livelihoods; rather their actions resembled more those of the syndicates or local politicians. In other words, instead of corresponding to my interlinked, culturally-mediated scientific and personal expectations of 'good' subaltern leaders, the behaviour of Álvaro and his peers pushed me to re-evaluate my conceptual apparatus.

I suggest that the disappointments I had in dealing with the tensions between expectations and findings are revealing about the wider structures (Shapiro 2005) that shape ethnographers' expectations towards interlocutors. My initial search for the existence of some kind of resistance among fishers and more radical political agency in Álvaro were also motivated by my liberal democratic cultural background and the structure of incentives in the academy. As I write above, the implications of the latter show in the tendency, in anthropology and also in disciplines such as development studies, to think of the political agency of those often described as subaltern in binary terms, of resistance / compliance, or through social movements (Bebbington and Abramovaj 2008; Carruthers 2008; Nash 2004), instead of examining the complexity of agency and political projects (Anand 2011; Golub 2014; Madhok 2013). This contradiction in anthropology is linked to a tension between the discipline's relativist will to understand the world and anthropology's universalist liberal ideals about changing it. For me, developing an understanding of the ambiguous and multiple politics of different groups of fishers and fisher leaders thereby required me during my first weeks of fieldwork to overcome the tendency to focus on 'resistance' and instead 'ask directions from those who lived along' the way, to return to Jackson's quotation in the epigraph (2012: 11).

Álvaro's persistence in getting me to see his contradictory positionality was instructive in terms of working my way through this initial disappointment. Its consequence was a gradual transformation in the way I observed and thought about the 'field' and about myself as an ethnographer. Comprehending the fishers' heterogeneity and their perspectives onto the working of power would not have been possible without my having also become part of the

secrecy and power games, which forced me to examine the origins of my preconceptions for fieldwork and findings.

Studies on the operation of state power in Mexico's agrarian and resource politics by Gledhill (2002; 2015) and Nuijten (2004), provide a framework for placing the field encounter in the wider political and economic context. Nuijten (2004) argues that the non-resolution of agrarian conflicts in Mexico through the combination of state violence and reproduction of people's hopes of access to justice is characteristic of the operation of power. Furthermore, in his recent work, Gledhill (2015) suggests that control over oil is increasingly linked to the ways state power operates 'behind masks' through the elite's strategies to re-impose authority by incorporating criminal actors into governance, co-opting others and criminalizing social movements. As for the fisher leaders' and fishers' politics, in addition to the role of the idea of oil as a shared resource and a source of national pride in influencing popular and sanctioned narratives about rights to resources, fishers' criminalization and the non-resolution of the conflict complicated their claim-making over access to what they, in essence, considered fishers' territory.

## THE FACE OF PROTECTION

In her essay about fieldwork in Brazil, Ruth Landes (1986: 138) speaks about how learning her place in the community was 'one's only vantage point for penetrating the culture' and gaining a perspective onto the issues she studied. For Landes, this primarily meant that her lens became one of a highly gendered and sexualized actor, immersed in masculine networks of patronage. Correspondingly, Kondo (1986), herself Japanese American, shows how her assuming a daughterly role in a Japanese family



produced a profound crisis of self, which led to an understanding about the Japanese conception of the relationship between the self and the social world. In my fieldwork, while Álvaro defied my attempts to categorize him, from the family's point of view I also avoided pigeon-holing. Having arrived in Tabasco without the properties of a Mexican, social, adult female (husband and children), it was easiest for the family to ascribe to me a kind of daughterly role although, in reality, as noted earlier, I was of course a white alien from a higher social stratum whose work in men's spheres examining politically sensitive issues was not ordinary woman's work. Consequently, family members, and especially Sofia, seemed intent on offsetting my complex positionality, alienness and our class differentials by highlighting my gender. Their very subtle, everyday attempts to emplace me in their context by referencing my womanhood resonated with the gendered aspects of my interaction with Álvaro and the fishers and also shaped my view of how power worked within the coastal communities.

Sofia was a teacher by profession. During the relatively short period of three months, we found a common language in which to talk about issues, especially those relating to being a woman and gaining a livelihood. I participated in Sofia's efforts to make a living, which extended beyond her daily job to less formal, home-based businesses in vending vegetables, fruit and shoes. Sofia also devoted much of her free time to a teenagers' dance and drumming group, which she saw as having the social function of keeping the young out of drugs and the drug trade. Having danced myself since childhood, I began to follow Sofia's group's rehearsals and performances to various parts of Tabasco and other parts of Mexico. Sofia was curious about ethnography's method of living with people as a way to do research, and my impression was

that she interpreted it as my becoming more like her instead of the skinny researcher, too immersed in reading and writing, that I was in her eyes. Sofia often made remarks about my appearance, eagerly instructing me in the proper ways to emphasize my femininity and sexuality by becoming 'fuller'. For me, however, Sofia's encouragements to become a Tabascan woman and thereby culturally meaningful for her were unsettling because they seemed to express resentment that the gap between us consisted of fundamental race and class differentials.

Furthermore, there was an aspect of control in Sofia's gendered and sexualized objectification of me which corresponded with the fishers' and their leaders' attempts at impacting the dynamics of the research encounter through subtly sexualized behaviour. These efforts also made me an object in these encounters, shaping the power dynamics of the research. However, whereas the sexualized aspect of my gender was highlighted in the encounters outside of home, inside, my gender was far more ambiguous and confusing to me, allowing the family to categorize me both as a 'daughter' and a woman. This ambiguity especially came together in the power dynamics between me and Álvaro, enabling the coexistence of a sexualized aspect and a more familial dynamic.

I understood this for the first time five weeks into fieldwork, when I had grown stressed about Álvaro's suspicions of me and about my own continuous efforts to categorize him and had begun spending more time with people outside the home. By then, the Vázquez kitchen had become the place where I often spent time talking with Álvaro, mostly listening to his various stories. In the weeks when I began to distance myself from his networks of fishers, he told me two stories that deviated from his usual style and had a supernatural dimension. Twice he shared a story about his grandmother who



had been a witch, able at will to turn herself into an animal. As a young man, when arriving home from a party at night, he had sometimes bumped into the grandmother when she had turned herself into a pig. Another out-of-the-ordinary story that he told me took place when my fieldwork stress had become nearly overwhelming. The message of the story was so strange to me that, anxious as I already was about our relations, I avoided asking him why he told it. The story went this way: In the past, people lived to be 115 to 120 years old. This was because in those days people ate more fruit. More curiously, he added, they also made love only once in eight days, wearing red bandages around their foreheads and taking the entire night. When the sex was over, Álvaro said, people did not shower but sat together to eat chicken.

I still am not sure why Álvaro wanted me to hear the stories, although I have two different interpretations of them. They could have been his way of communicating about how radically he thought life's fundamentals, spirituality and sexuality, had changed during his lifetime. In the stories, the control over these fundamentals rested in the communities themselves. Álvaro often communicated corresponding experiences of change and/or loss, ranging from a personal experience of losing control of the body through increased consumption of imported, industrialized food to the dissolving of social networks of mutual support and solidarity. From this perspective, what went on in the politics of resource access was part of a much larger and long-term change whereby the government had come to exert control over issues previously under the communities' authority. I have come to think that perhaps he was making a claim to that control.

At the same time, the stories could be heard as what Crapanzano (2012: 558–559) discusses

as references to 'the Third'. According to him, in fieldwork situations where interpersonal relations and their relevant context are under negotiation, interaction may make reference to a Third, an authoritative figure, a totem or a father who is outside of the interaction and serves the meta-pragmatic function of defining the encounter, its relevant context and how the communication is to be taken. Álvaro's references to the secrets of longevity and to his grandmother as a witch were both gendered and sexualized, the former openly so and the latter more subtly. Following Crapanzano's thought, and considering Kondo's (1986) analysis, Álvaro's stories, especially the one about longevity, could perhaps be interpreted as the context for my and Álvaro's research encounter, highlighting Álvaro's authority and my womanhood at a moment when I sought to evade his efforts to shape my fieldwork.

In response to my perceived control and objectification, then, I expanded fieldwork to people outside of Álvaro's sphere of influence. At the same time as this was a conscious research strategy, in some ways it also resembled the crisis Kondo (1986) describes, as I felt unable to fit the categories that were there for me. Six weeks into fieldwork, I began to suggest to Álvaro my plans of involving *pescadores libres* in my study. Understanding better their place in resource politics, I explained, was a necessary part of my research; in response, Álvaro mostly expressed concern about my safety. Every time I mentioned my plans to him, he would warn me that wandering alone into the unlicensed fishers' living quarters at the town's outskirts could be dangerous and suggest that I go with his nephew. When I asked other people, however, I was told that the area did not pose a risk for me, and ten weeks into fieldwork I went ahead, riding on the back of the scooter of a female acquaintance I had met at a town café.

During interviews with the *pescadores libres*, however, I came across a situation which heightened the impression that I was unable to judge the extent of government control at the oil frontier. I was interviewing the wife of an unlicensed fisher when a car drove into the yard and two men got out, asking the woman for her ID. All three of them were extremely serious, and I seemed to be entirely invisible to the men, who took the ID, bought a bag of shrimp from the woman's stall and left. I was terrified. I asked the woman what had just happened and she said that the men would return and bring the ID back with a pig for her. Later I learned this transaction of relinquishing one's ID in return for a pig was an old PRI vote-buying tactic (the elections were the following year) of making people believe they were able to follow how people voted by taking copies of the IDs of those who had promised their votes to the party.

Yet why did the men not seem to stop at any other house? Why did they not pay any attention to me even though seeing a *gringa* on her own in a tiny fisher community far from downtown should have caught their attention? Like the secretariat officials at Álvaro's house, these men did not appear to notice me. Was I only growing increasingly suspicious about the government's following me at the same time that I had decided to overstep the boundaries that Álvaro had tried to impose? I never told Álvaro about the men; neither did I report anything to my notebook about how terrified I had been. The incident fused into a general feeling resembling paranoia that I experienced in those weeks.

Back at home, I did tell Álvaro about my interviews, however, and he countered me aggressively. 'What did they cry to you about?' he asked with a tone that mocked the fishers' concerns. I was shocked I had underestimated the situation and let myself believe that Álvaro

'understood' that I would eventually go beyond his networks. At that moment my feeling was one of sudden fright and anger about his reaction to my crossing a line I had refused to accept. Terribly uncomfortable, I responded vaguely that the unlicensed fishers had concerns similar to those of other fishers and refused to continue the conversation. Álvaro calmed down, left my desk and went to watch TV. We never returned to the issue of the interviews.

The tensions that surfaced during the kitchen table discussions and after the interviews with unlicensed fishers took place in the intersection of the roles into which I and Álvaro's family tried to fit each other. They revealed to me how much was at stake for Álvaro in his wish that I respect the boundaries he tried to set for me. They also exposed my naïveté over our familial roles and my hope that by knowing me as a family-member, which I of course never really was, Álvaro could somehow be sympathetic to my project, no matter where it took me. But then, why would he, considering his jokes about my being a potential spy. In retrospect, how much, in any case, did he actually want to 'control' me, and how much was it just in his nature to be suspicious, or alternatively, to succumb to pressures from other quarters?

The efforts by the Vázquezes to shape the contours of me and my project, and my own initial efforts to play along, made me aware of the distance between us, which in turn shaped my perspective onto the politics of fisheries and oil. Seeing how, despite trying to fit into the family, I was unable to 'become' a Tabascan woman or assuage Álvaro's suspicions about my intentions, I began to spend more time with other townspeople and foreign oil workers I had come to know. While my decision to invest in these other networks bore some similarities to Kondo's (1986) fieldwork, an obvious difference was Tabasco's political context where

tensions between different actors surfaced in the every day. The women of Álvaro's family had so far been a kind of an escape from the masculine and often confrontational spaces, and I now similarly sought the company of female acquaintances and foreign men working for Explora, who represented social relations that I felt were free from patronage. Yet this made me realize that the protection of Álvaro, the family and other fisher families had actually provided me with a sense of comfort and security; but having lost my patience with Álvaro's 'guidance' of my fieldwork and by not following the rules of the networks based on male authority, I had lost my claim to a woman's place. In these new, ephemeral relationships with people outside of Álvaro's circles, I found myself looking for the same kind of protection; not finding it, I felt vulnerable.

The Vázquez women met my increased absence from home by correspondingly excluding me from some of their familial activities and conversations. Because the change in their behaviour was subtle, I did not feel comfortable bringing it up and was thus unsure of possible reasons for it. It seemed to me as if the women were communicating perplexity, disapproval and disappointment in my refusal to try harder. While it was easy for me to explain both to myself and to them that I was busy working with fishers and oil workers, the women possibly interpreted my behaviour very differently. For them it perhaps meant a reluctance to engage in the household duties and discussions they shared, lack of appreciation for their concern for my security when moving around by myself, and suspicious relations with foreign, white men who for them possibly represented the invasion of their territory and patrimony, despite the fact that existing resentments about *gringos* were seldom expressed.

## RATIONALITIES OF POWER AT HOME AND AT THE SEA

### LESS VISIBLE POLITICS

The fear, secrecy and silence characteristic of conflict and post conflict contexts draw the ethnographer's attention to cues for understanding beyond words (Geros 2008; Taussig 2011). With Álvaro's house as my window to the fishers' situation, I realized the politics of access to Doña Elena's kitchen had metaphorically begun to resemble *la zona restringida* (this was how fishers often called the zone of exclusion). I had noticed that the kitchen, located at the furthest end of the house, was the space where only family, close friends and other Very Important People were allowed, the way the zone of exclusion only gave access to the oil industry. Less familiar people who sought Álvaro's advice—and there were many for him to attend to—were dealt with on the porch while some were invited inside to the living room. As my room was adjacent to the living room, in the space in between the porch and the kitchen, I got to observe the social geography of the relations between Álvaro and his protégés and patrons.

There was some resemblance between the positions Álvaro occupied in the house and with regard to the offshore. While the unequal spatial politics of the house and the offshore in some ways served Álvaro's interests, he could not exert ultimate control over who was allowed in. From the door of my room, I saw how Doña Ana opened the kitchen door for the secretariat men as mandatory guests. Correspondingly, Álvaro helped keep the oil industry in and the fishers out of the zone of exclusion by exercising his mediatory powers and avoiding open protest. However, while the government sought to use Álvaro to maintain the useful hierarchies

between those fishers with access to livelihoods and political representation and those without, Álvaro also actively looked for ways to escape control, assisting fishers to defy the constraining rules of compensation programs. I am pressed to wonder—at home, had Álvaro perhaps also been flouting the repressive politics by organizing a meeting with the secretariat representatives on a day when I, a potentially unwanted set of eyes and ears, from the oil industry's perspective, was scheduled to appear, surprising the representatives?

Being excluded from many of the political negotiations between the fishers' leadership and the oil industry, especially at the beginning of fieldwork, gave me an important entry point into the rationality of the leaders' actions vis-à-vis the state and the oil industry. My attention was on the tensions among the different groups of fishers, entrepreneurs and political leaders, on the secrecy involved, and on the importance that leaders placed on seeking protection from governmental institutions and political parties. Together, these issues showed me how the leaders' ideas of the state drew on the residue of corporativism and government control, linked with the legacy of the authoritarian past and the strongly symbolic importance of the parastatal company in national politics and as well as the popular idea of oil as a patrimonial resource (Breglia 2013; Quist and Rinne forthcoming; Zalík 2012). Concomitantly, the fishers' contemporary disconnect from NGOs and from movements of local, national or international scale at the same time as their political tactics expanded into a range of legal and extra-legal practices appeared to be the product of restrictive legislation, revealing how the coastal communities were pushed to operate in ways and through organizations that were politically less visible.

In retrospect, the difficulty I had assuming a culturally acceptable role within the patronage networks in the context of political struggle cast light on how Tabascans sought protection. I saw that there were differences in how fishers sought guidance on social and political issues and economic opportunities from fisher leaders. Some fishers belonging to Álvaro's federation invested in patronage relations with him alone, while others dealt more flexibly with various 'competing' patrons. These relations between fishers and their leaders corresponded to some degree with the fisher leaders' relations with state actors: some leaders were 'loyal' to politicians and government people that belonged to one particular party whereas many others either kept changing their political affiliation or tried to network with people from various parties at the same time, a tactic which made some leaders earn the nickname *cameleón*. This search for protection from multiple sources becomes understandable in the wider framework of the Mexicans' disillusionment with the PRI since its final years of unbroken rule in the 1990s, and how it has led people to turn from earlier social networks to the search for 'any patrons who might offer a helping hand' (Gledhill 2002: 54).

Correspondingly, my attention was also on how patrons displayed a variable degree of care and protection towards their protégées. Fisher leaders and fishing entrepreneurs worked either with fishers who belonged to their cooperative or employed unlicensed fishers who were practically dependent on them for access to a fishing license. Many of the patrons kept the fishers up-to-date about the operations of the government and the oil industry, and sought to assist the fishers to get the best out of various support programmes offered. However, labour relations between the license-holding entrepreneurs and unlicensed

fishers often involved debt, which kept many fishers bound to their patrons. Furthermore, curiously, although the reparations granted by the oil industry formally involved only licensed fishers, some license-holders distributed some of the gasoline they received from Pemex to 'their' unlicensed fishers, thereby gaining some leverage over them. Generally speaking, however, the strict division between formal and informal fishers—accentuated by the discontinuation of granting new fishing licenses and related acts of political and economic exclusion—essentially highlighted the power differentials and related frictions among the fisher folk.

## ACCESS AND UNDERSTANDING

Having gained distance from the intimacy of the Vázquez family and our mutual attempts to fit each other into certain categories, it was easier for me to show Álvaro that he had no reason to be concerned about my intentions. Ten weeks into fieldwork, having obtained access to other leaders of Álvaro's faction, they allowed me to attend their meetings. This was a major breakthrough in my work. The leaders let me follow them a few times when they met among themselves, with their constituent fishers, and with oil industry and state actors. When I hesitantly discussed my upcoming participation with Álvaro, who was also going to be present, he said that I could of course go: 'I have nothing to hide,' he told me, although visibly uncomfortable.

One of the meetings was a forum where the content of Tabasco's upcoming law on aquaculture and fishing was discussed. Before the forum, Álvaro and a group of leaders involved me in a meeting where we went through the proposed legislative text and thought of ways to improve it from the fishers' perspective. Participating in reviewing the text

and in following the event itself was one of my few chances to show Álvaro how serious I was about my work of trying to understand the fishers' situation. While it seemed to me that he noticed my efforts, it was during our drive to the very same forum on legislation that he told me not to ask him 'any more questions' (the essay's opening quote), reminding me that the barrier between us actually depended on much more than my enthusiasm and trustworthiness. Likewise, in the political meetings that I finally attended towards the end of fieldwork, faithful to his caution Álvaro remained quiet, withdrawing into the background of the discussions. No attempts by me to reassure Álvaro about my interests could have broken the wall of silence.

Having gained access to these meetings, I realized that if I had stayed within Álvaro's close circles it would never have happened. Álvaro seemed more concerned about my activities than some of the others, perhaps because he did not trust my intentions as a *gringa*, or perhaps because the oil industry had pressured him to monitor my fieldwork. This is something I will never know for sure. In retrospect, it is apparent that my attempts to categorize Álvaro reflected not only how I had learned to think but also reflected my place within the structures of incentives where writing about 'resistance' is rewarded. By the same token, Álvaro's operations as a mediator revealed the context of power and incentives within which he was located, which were strictly delimited. Within the conflict over space, it was difficult for the fisher leaders to network with other actors such as *campesinos* or oil industry workers as they had before, because securing offshore access was not in anybody else's interests. Fishing was also becoming less tempting with the wave of urbanisation among young adults. Furthermore, the fisher leaders could not defend



the unlicensed fishers' formalization because it threatened their licensed constituents' agendas.

However, the analytical move of placing the fieldwork encounter in its historical and political-economic context led me to appreciate the continued popular resonance among Tabascans of the idea of post-revolutionary Mexico's oil as patrimony and wealth to be shared. The fisher leaders were in an easier position to demand access to compensations from *la paraestatal* than to completely oppose its operations, despite the fact that they considered the Gulf of Mexico waters their territory. Moreover, in the situation where fishing was largely criminalized and opposition to the oil industry had recently been violently repressed, fishers operated beyond formal political arenas. At a time prior to *la Reforma Energética* and the opening of the shares from oil extraction to foreign, private companies, Álvaro's mediatory tactics reflected the power that ideas of people's oil continued to have in Mexico at the same time as they reflected his knowledge of law, politics and multiple ways of evading control to defend access to the sea (Scott 1985).

## CONCLUSION

Time shifts the perspectives we gain through ethnographic reflexivity, though the process never reaches a final epiphany. Furthermore, the reflection seldom involves space for the interlocutors' post-fieldwork thoughts, thereby underlining the ethnographer's ownership of the text (Kondo 1986). I returned to Tabasco for three more months in 2012, but this time I mostly lived in the state capital, Villahermosa, and with unlicensed fishers at the coast. I visited the Vázquez family early on during the second trip to find that the tensions between us had dissipated and in their place was reserved warmth. Yet, sitting in the living room with

Álvaro, going through an analysis of the politics of resource access that I had written for him to assess, I realized that while I no longer needed to ponder whether he was fish or fowl, the question of my identity was perhaps still unresolved for him.

In this essay, drawing on reflexive analysis of my relations with the Vázquez family, I have examined how my insights about the politics of fisheries and oil have developed in tandem with my place within the family (Kondo 1986; Landes 1986). That place, and the dynamics of the research encounter were shaped at the intersection of my own background, Álvaro and his family's expectations towards me, and the temporal and political economic context of the resource conflict among fishers and the oil industry. The resource frontier, in which during fieldwork in 2011–2012 the operators were the Mexican parastatal company and its foreign subcontractors, was becoming a territory where privatization was increasingly linked to Mexico's elites' strategies to re-impose state authority (Gledhill 2015; Watts 2012).

In showing the fundamentally intersubjective and personal character of knowledge production, I have wanted to draw attention to how knowledge about conflicts is often born through fragile relationships, of trial and error in the context of secrecy and silence, and as something that happens *through* the subjective experience and creation by the ethnographer. The interactions through which the knowledge is produced involve more often than not a confused ethnographer and a defensive interlocutor, situated within asymmetrical relations of power. As several ethnographers (Coleman 2009; Collins and Gallinat 2010) have shown, fieldwork and the involved power games between the ethnographer and the interlocutor do not take place in an emotional vacuum, and as Malkki (2007: 173–174) writes,



‘the participant observer is not a fly,’ an invisible observer, but an active, albeit often controversial participant in the lives of interlocutors. Here I have tried to show how my expectations of Álvaro, my ambiguous roles in the family and Álvaro’s careful techniques of instructing me were decisive for my learning to see how fisher leaders made sense of the rationalities of power in Tabasco.

That I could not accept Álvaro’s authoritative guidance of fieldwork, which ran against my culturally-bound identity as a woman and a researcher, my expectations of a ‘good’ subaltern leader, and showed my related difficulty in operating within patronage networks and the various spheres of resource politics, brought me to analyze the tensions between us and how they shaped my perspective. My fixation on political division among the fishers, however, produced at first a such a sense of failure that I had to ask myself whether I would have been able to see ‘resistance’, had I wanted to, or had I been someone else, or had my entry to politics been through other people. This highlighted for me that ethnographers should more carefully examine where the need to categorize and judge comes from, and how and how much it blocks us from seeing.

As I have shown in this essay, the ways in which the fishers’ leadership reasoned about power and networked with other actors to defend what they considered to be their right as fishers to space and livelihoods, reflected popular narratives about the people’s oil, long-term experience of authoritarian Mexico and its political legacy since 2000, and disillusionment with the PRI of the 1990s and the neoliberal policies enforced recently by both PRI and PAN. Analyzing my relationship with Álvaro, however, underscored my difficulty in capturing in thought and words the leader that Álvaro

embodied without exaggerating or downplaying the structure of power (Anand 2011; Madhok 2013) where he operated or veiling the contradiction between the fishers’ leadership’s official objectives and the amendments they made in order to remain the fishers’ representatives. In examining a significant part of my fieldwork in Tabasco by exercising reflexivity, I have wanted to draw attention to ethnography’s importance in showing the complexity and situatedness of politics of resource access.

Introducing me to cooperative fishers at the beginning of fieldwork, Álvaro once asked me how they would know where the information they gave me would end up. ‘*Si te doy mis secretos...*,’ he began (if I give you my secrets). I stopped to search for words to tell that my intention was to give ‘as objective a perspective’ as possible about the fishers, but he, for good reason, hurried to correct me: ‘as trustworthy a perspective as possible’. At that moment, more than I, it was he who spoke the language of ethnography. In the end, Álvaro did not trust his secrets about political mediatorship to me, but instead made me examine why I had thought it possible in the first place.

## NOTES

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Tammisto for their important comments on ideas for and draft versions of this article, and Marie-Louise Karttunen for her excellent language editing.

- 2 All names of people in this article are pseudonyms.
- 3 Petróleos Mexicanos was privatized in 2014.
- 4 These estimates are from an interview with a fishing official in 2011 and official statistics from 2009 (INEGI, 2010).
- 5 This is based on Saury Arias' (2010: 111) estimates of the number of fishers in Frontera, one of Tabasco's three coastal fishing towns.
- 6 While my interpretations of Álvaro's opinions are speculative, surmise about my possible links with the U.S. was expressed more explicitly to me by a government official who suspected that I was tracking fishers involved in the smuggling of drugs to the U.S.
- 7 Pseudonym for a subcontractor company which was carrying out geophysical studies along Tabasco's coast.

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